

AN
AWFULLY
BEAUTIFUL
PLACE
:

THE
ANTARCTIC
ART
OF
STEPHEN
EASTAUGH

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FOREWORD

tony fleming

This year, Australia celebrates 100 years of Australian Antarctic Expeditions. Douglas Mawson's heroic 1911-14 Australasian Antarctic Expedition (AAE) recognised the importance of Antarctica for scientific discovery and the significance to the world of this wild untamed land. Stephen Eastaugh, as the only Australian Antarctic Arts Fellow to spend a winter in Antarctica, perhaps has a better insight than most of what it was like for those members of the AAE who spent two long, dark winters on the continent.

The body of work Stephen has produced from his experience communicates an understanding, a connection, and an acknowledgement of history. His work plays a vital part in the effort to communicate to the world the importance of Antarctica, and the work that we do there.



Tony Fleming,

Director

Australian Antarctic Division

detail

Travillagues - MacRobertson Land
acrylic, bandage, 15cm x 25cm ea. [x10], 2009

S. by S.E.

Stephen Eastaugh's nine separate journeys across the vastness of the Southern Ocean to the southern continent make him the world's most experienced Antarctic artist. A curious distinction and, it must be said, one not sought by many. Yet it is crucial to an understanding of the what and the why of his paintings of recent years.

They appear to be crude things, or raw, at least. Squares of unstretched linen are crushed and crumpled, the resulting network of creases looking like skin (a human palm or heel, or cold-chapped lips), like an aerial view or relief map of mountains or ice fields, like the drying cracks of mud, the crazing of frozen seas. In and over this primary surface Eastaugh floats soft-mosaic clouds or ice-floes of acrylic paint, a blotchy all-overness of thick opacities and rough scumbles and drags, occasionally relieved by contrasting small marks: stellar chroma, blinking lights.

These broad, barren, organic-geological expanses are contained and defined and brought into focus by traveller's craft, an itinerant's improvised running repairs in rough-sewn thread: hemmed edges, dotted line grids, scattered cross-stitch snowflakes. Paradoxically, the geometric discipline somehow humanizes the work. For this artist, the grid is not a means of hard-edge, abstract purification, of de-personalizing the practice of painting, but rather serves to introduce notions of human invention and mensuration. There is something about the works that is quietly domestic, recalling blackwork napkins or doilies, or hand-made quilts, and there is something that is just as hand-made but boldly heraldic, like Fante *asafo* flags. The patterns of repeated squares seem to imply empirical-scientific apparatus and methodology: a net of longitude and latitude across which broken-line explorers' tracks meander erratically, a graph paper on which the artist's experiences can be plotted. They are the doors and windows of the station's jumbled Lego architecture, the zipper on the polar fleece jacket, the caterpillar tracks on the sno-cat.

plate + detail [page 07]

Making space place,
acrylic, cotton, wool, linen, 15cm x 15cm ea. (x9), 2007



Most of all, these pale, wobbly, Agnes Martin chequerboards signify the rows and columns and boxes of the calendar, the relentless passage of time which is both intensified and voided by the seeming endlessness of the Antarctic ice and snow, of the ice-blinking white horizon, the seeming endlessness of an expeditioner's long season, of the polar winter night.

In the eternal snows, in the eternal distance of very low aerosol optical thickness, in the eternal tedium of cabin fever in the 'Wombat' hut which is his studio, the Antarctic anchorite hits the existential wall. In this meta-sublime 'everywhere' ¹, what saves him from madness and his art from blandness are close-up, tangible things: the knots of acrylic rope that hold structures down or together against the ferocity of the 70-knot katabatic winds, or the concrete-filled 44-gallon drums which, laced together by 'blizz[ard] lines' enable safe passage through snowstorms, or what Eastaugh describes as the 'tiny trees' of Antarctic lichens, mosses and liverworts. Through such repeatedly and intimately experienced motifs – identifiable things on the cusp of becoming abstract glyphs, and vice-versa – Eastaugh locates and presents himself, both as experimenter and as observer, as wave and particle.

Unlike many one-stay, short-stay Antarctic artists, who revel in the grandeur of ocean and icebergs and mountains, Eastaugh has clearly had enough. As he puts it in the voice-over commentary in one of his short films, *Jolly*, there is 'lots of sublime stuff ... it stinks of stunning ... look, there's another fucking sublime bit over there ...' So the nine-timer looks down, holds on, goes inside, and paints a self-portrait. As an iceman. As ice.

David Hansen

Melbourne
November 2011

¹ The neologism is the name of the artist's website, and the collective title of an extensive body of nomadological art he made largely in Asia some years ago. At Davis Station, he had the word inscribed on a sign which, with four other tiny outdoor sculptures, made up the first sculpture garden in Antarctica.





keeping the right distance

When one tries to place Stephen Eastaugh's practice within a theoretical and conceptual discourse it is quite a clear and almost pragmatic process of allocation - a prolific contemporary visual artist working peripatetically across the globe. Often choosing barren and desolate locales (in the last decade regularly Antarctica), it is easy and often correct to associate his work with psychogeography, the slippage between space, place and home, and contemporary notions of wilderness and landscape.

If we jump on *Google Maps* and identify Eastaugh's previous studio warrens, an impressive red flag jigsaw appears, mapping a sexy archive of an artist inhabiting sites most only consider as potentially accessible but forever distant.

While Eastaugh's work sits well within this global artist-in-residence fad, and hence the dialectic that comes inside that well researched suitcase, a succinct placing of his practice - both geographic and artistic, is much more complicated and begs a more thorough process of unpacking, at least here and there, every now and then.

His trajectory is almost nomadic; a work started in Antarctica may be finished in Greenland, a series of drawings referencing wet lichen found on the ice, may talk formally to a series made while working on the dry wheatbelts of Western Australia (again a period sandwiched by a short stay in Iceland and a stint in Mendoza, Argentina, at the foot of the Andes). Today's linear residency approach *working on residence then producing post experience* becomes muddled by Eastaugh's over-

detail page 08|09
Blizz Line (winter)
acrylic, cotton, wool, linen, 210cm x 425cm, 2009

commitment to locale and junkie-ness for new sites. Once again site needs redefining; site-specificity becomes crucial due to the type of chosen locations albeit the lack of viewer and nature of practice result in the work existing within site mentally rather than physically.

In *One Place After Another* Miwon Kwon critically unravels the almost everyday list of hyphenated *site-specific-terminology* increasingly used in mainstream art lingo¹. Interestingly, it still remains difficult to disengage from the site-specificity discussions; i.e. the meeting of site/gallery (often involving intervention) and the audience member being an encounterer or participator (usually public and/or local). Eastaugh operates from the peripheries; whilst his work could be discussed within multiple such *site-derivatives* his primarily two-dimensional practice manages to maintain a distance from such labels. When discussing his Antarctic oeuvre this becomes inescapable. The viewer cannot separate the work from an Antarctic-specific (site-specific) reading, at the same time the work remains within a more conventional art-object/viewer canon that is not readily associated with site-specificity.

The viewer recalls a *site-ness* that is site-driven or site-from, rather than the work physically existing within a given space. Eastaugh primarily makes work for a gallery context, but its reading cannot be separated from site. By auto-association to geography, one reads a different type of site intervention, one indexical to working on such locations.

There exists an intervention - the explorer, the researcher, the artist as inquisitor of all things foreign. Any discussion of human merits on Antarctica is in itself a spatial intervention. Be it the plant biologist or the visual artist, their practice emerges from inhabiting a space that is permanently uninhabitable and although it offers temporary abode it remains fleeting, a landscape that most only know from others' impermanent residencies. Eastaugh's *nomadcity* lends itself to a constant re-examining of the unheimlich and the definition of home in temporary locales. This is tricky terrain. Eastaugh challenges the possibility of claiming home in spaces that remain no-ones home.

¹ Kwon, Miwon 2002, *One place after another: site-specific art and locational identity*, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA

While much of his practice relates to the visual geography of the given place there is a domestication of materials, repetitive marks, motifs, stitching – that claims this space through process. *Domesticating Ice, 2006* are a series of small paintings, acting as studies of something foreign while daily, the everyday material of an artist working on the ice. The stitching that then occurs embodies each painting in an attempt to ground the subject, temporarily fix a material that is mutually organic and alien.

In the accompanying publication to MASS MoCA's semi-recent exhibition *Badlands: New Horizons in Landscape, 2009* curated by Denise Markonish, Ginger Strand explores the limitations and potential in how we approach and talk about 'landscape'. In particular the manner in which we as viewer discuss beauty and manage our proximity to the space we label as 'landscape'.

'... What's at stake is not simply beauty, or its moral meaning, but our very way of moving forward in a flawed world. When we invoke the sublime, we find another way of looking at looking: the landscape genre can be seen as a kind of performance, an interaction between land and viewer that is rehearsed endlessly in the presence of the viewer...' ²

The beauty within Eastaugh's practice exists within a series of carefully calibrated distances that he is able to maintain. From known locations, from visual sources for imagery – proximity is what makes his work human and difficult to grasp accordingly. There are references to geographic sources (*Traialogue – MacRobertson Land, 2009* or the *Outlandish Aurora series, 2009*) or the use of narrative to define space as place (*Traialogue - Brookes Hut, 2003* or *Dongas/No one home, 2003*) but Eastaugh's series of threads of enquiry remain constant across his many voyages. Much of his work dictates process and duration, be it through the repetition of suitcase motifs or the crumpling of materials to create creases that are then highlighted with pigment.

Marking ones' territory when in a new space, Eastaugh uses text to list what is absent and what is foreign in a new locale. Like a true nomad the process of domesticating a site appears harsh but rewarding. Grids and pattern are used to contain information and digest experience and stimuli, a way of grounding, ordering, familiarizing natural elements that stay perpetually ungraspable. The work then begins to meander off location and investigate raw and human queries. Distance is maintained; the work stays local as much as global, repeatedly domestic whilst foreign. Eastaugh's practice is as difficult to pin-down as the artist himself.

Is this an artist that works globally by trying to represent what the process of that label might look like rather than biennale hopping? Have we found an artist so committed to site that the work could be labeled site-specific without a relational temporary community project labeling it as such? These are big claims, but Eastaugh works in a manner that is almost unmatched. He is not the first or the last to commit a period of working on and about Antarctica, but he is one of few practitioners whose experience on location, particularly on the uninhabited ice have built a practice which sits in and outside of many discourses that have become the everyday in contemporary art.

2 Strand, Ginger, ed. Markonish, Denise 2009, *Badlands: New Horizons in Landscape*, MASS MoCA, The MIT Press, Cambridge MA 86-87

PLATES



If I seriously contemplate the monstrous size along with the inhuman timescale that has formed the Ice, then I must confess that I have seen very little - perhaps even less than nothing - of this awfully beautiful place

Stephen Eastaugh, 2009

detail
Travaillogues - MacRobertson Land
acrylic, bandage, 15cm x 25cm ea. [x10], 2009



plate
The alcohol and chocolate problem
 acrylic, wool, cotton, linen, 140cm x 140cm, 2009



plate
Slots and Peaks / Sexy Danger
 acrylic, cotton, linen, 190cm x 350cm, 2005

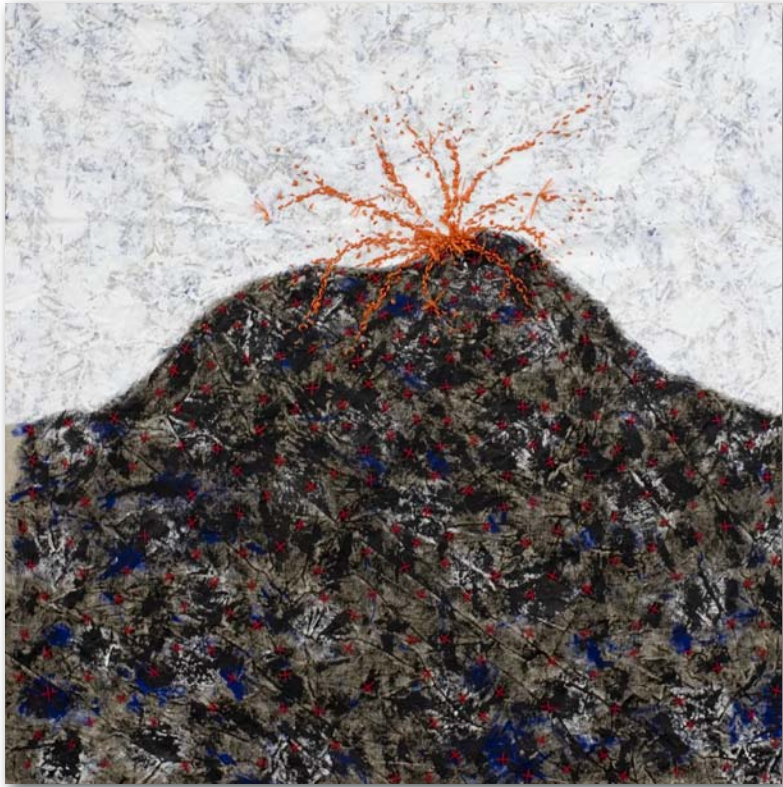


plate
257 Crosses / Mt Erebus [McMurdo, Ross Is]
acrylic, cotton, wool, linen, 140cm x 140cm, 2006

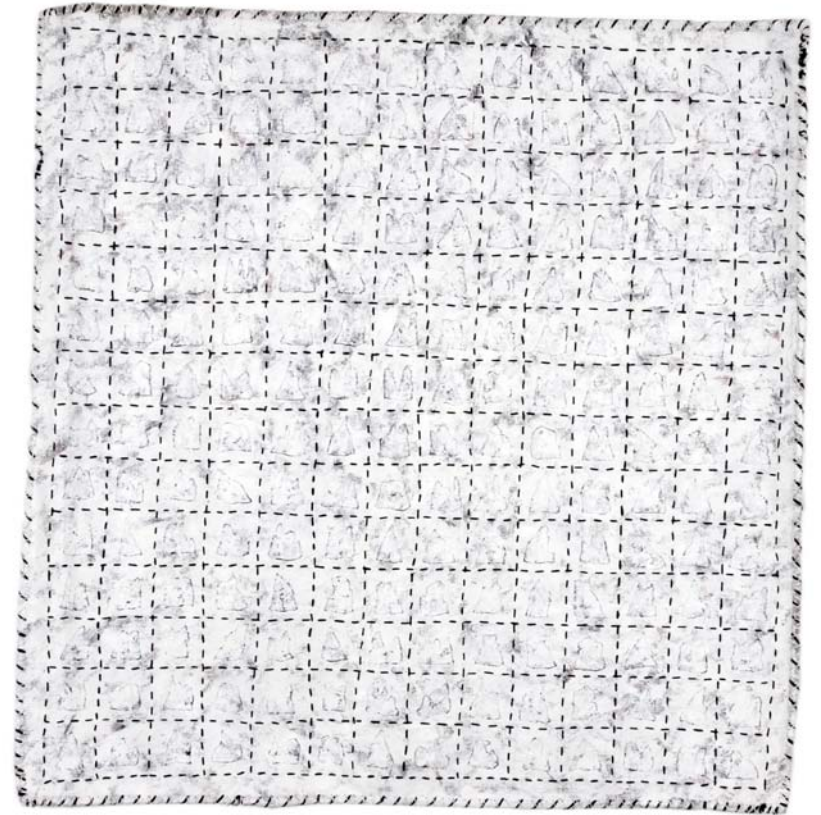


plate
Berg Farm
acrylic, cotton, wool, linen, 140cm x 140cm, 2003

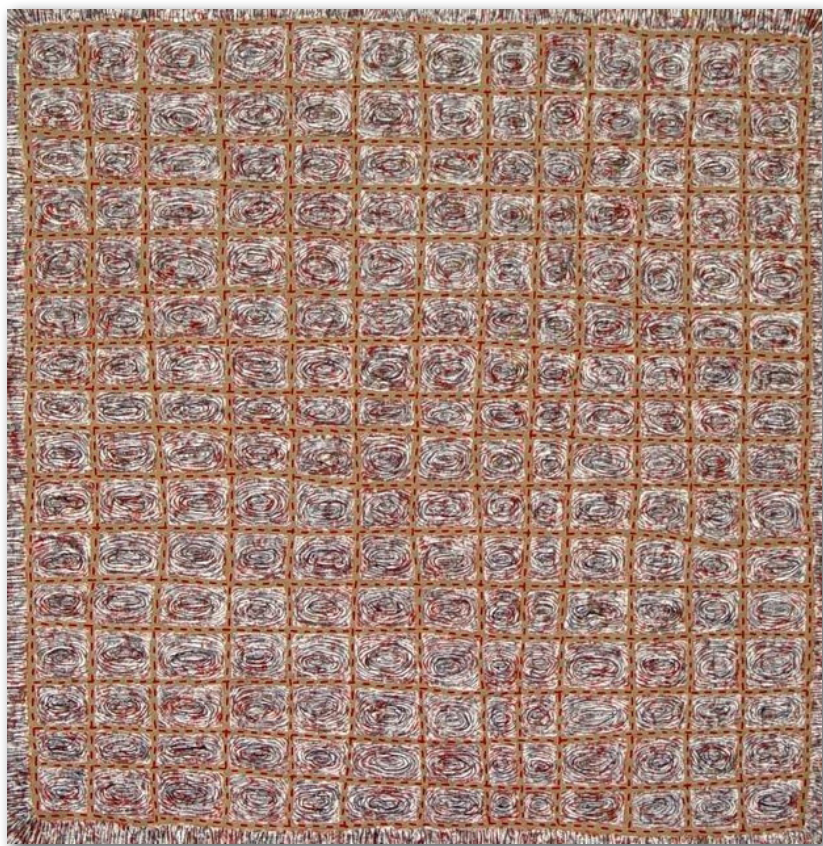


plate
Wallow/Spontaneous Trance State
 acrylic, cotton, wool, linen, 140cm x 140cm, 2003

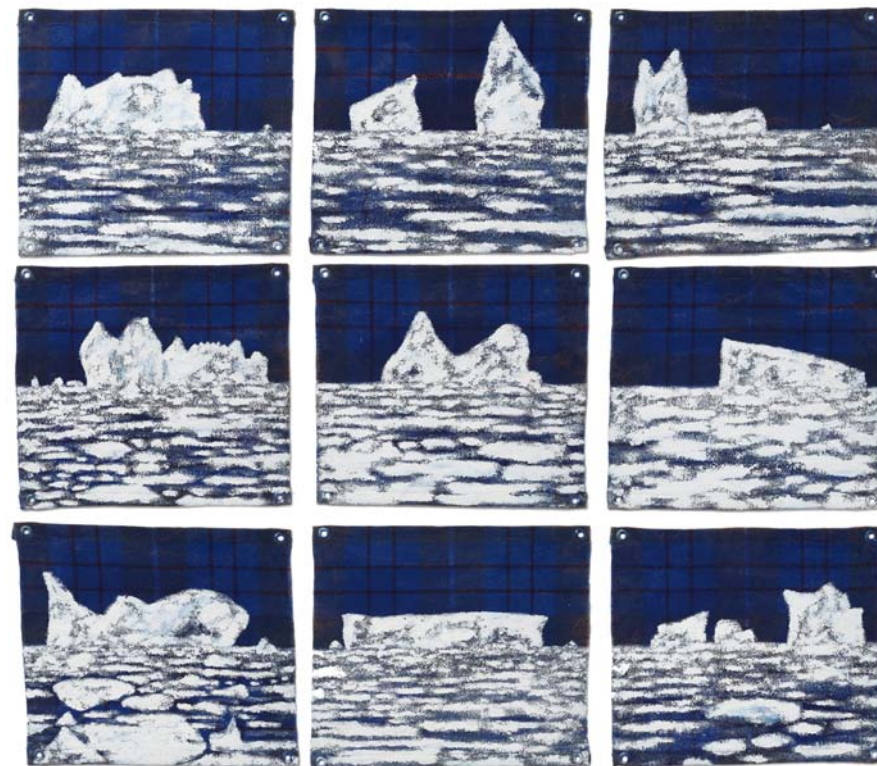


plate
Icebergs
 40cm x 40cm ea. acrylic, woolen blanket, [x9], 2000,
 courtesy of the Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth.

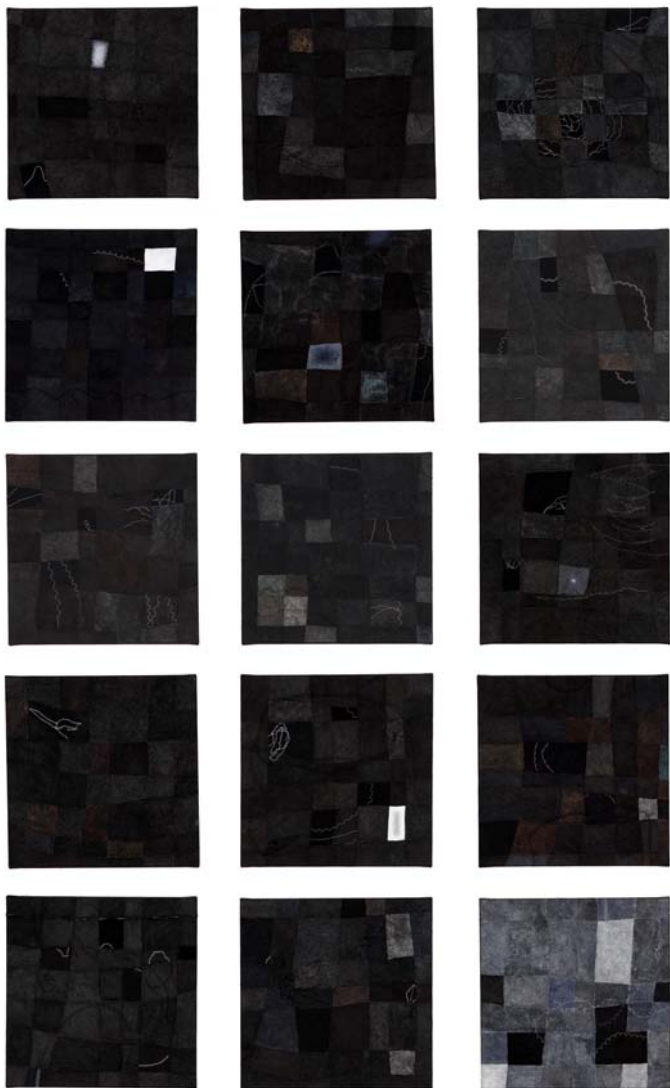
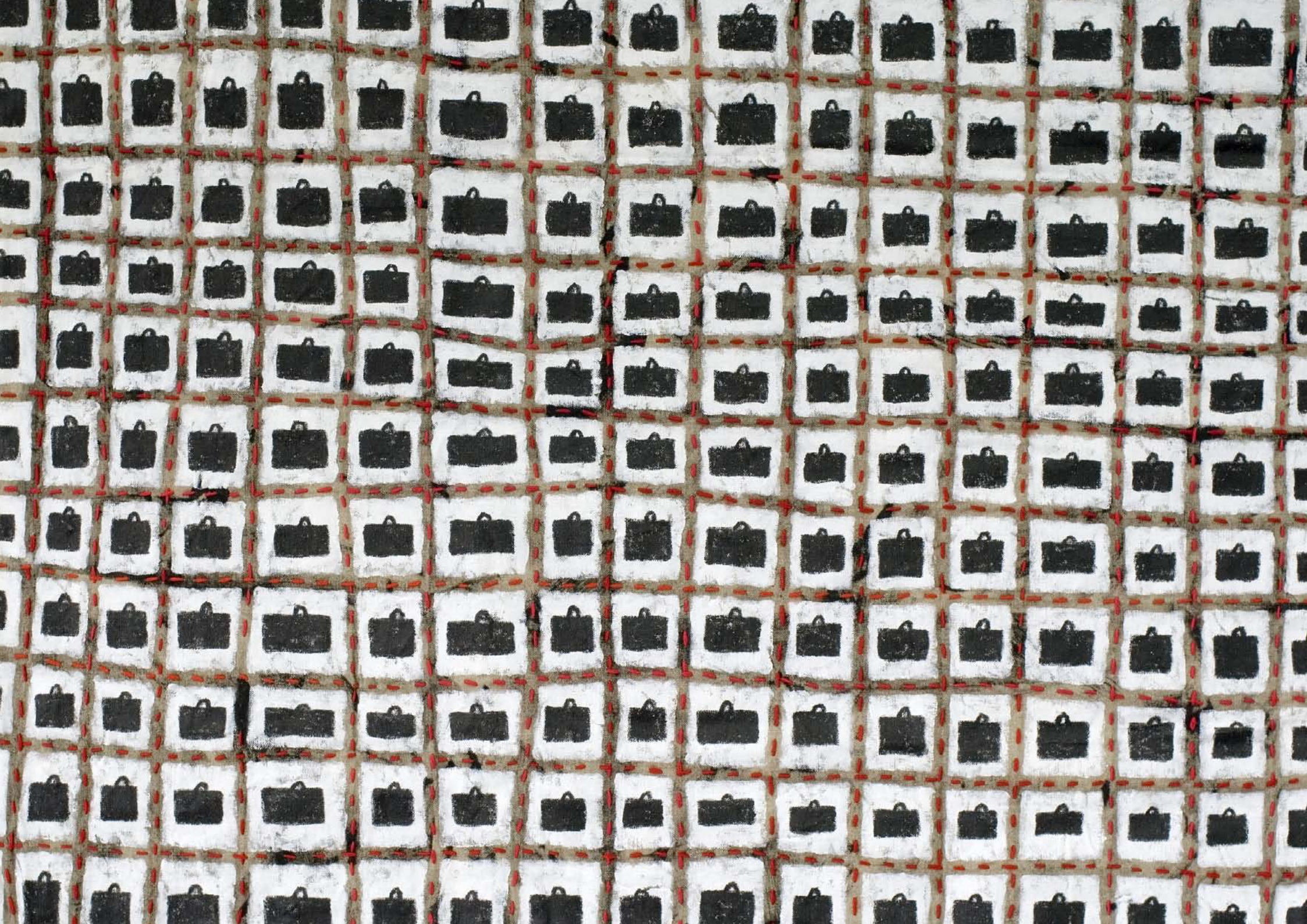


plate
A good day tonight
 acrylic, cotton, linen, 40cm x 40cm ea. [x30], 2009



detail page 24|25
Packing
 acrylic, cotton, wool, linen, 21.5cm x 370cm, 2004



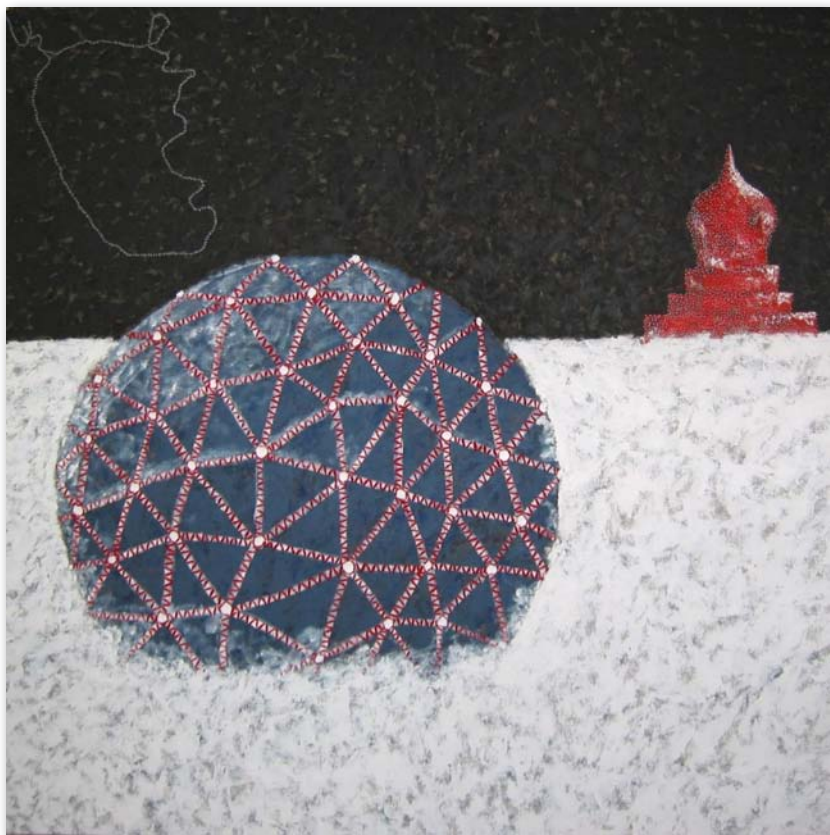


plate
Where R U? [Jean Baptiste Charcot]
 acrylic, cotton, wool, linen, 140cm x 140cm, 2003

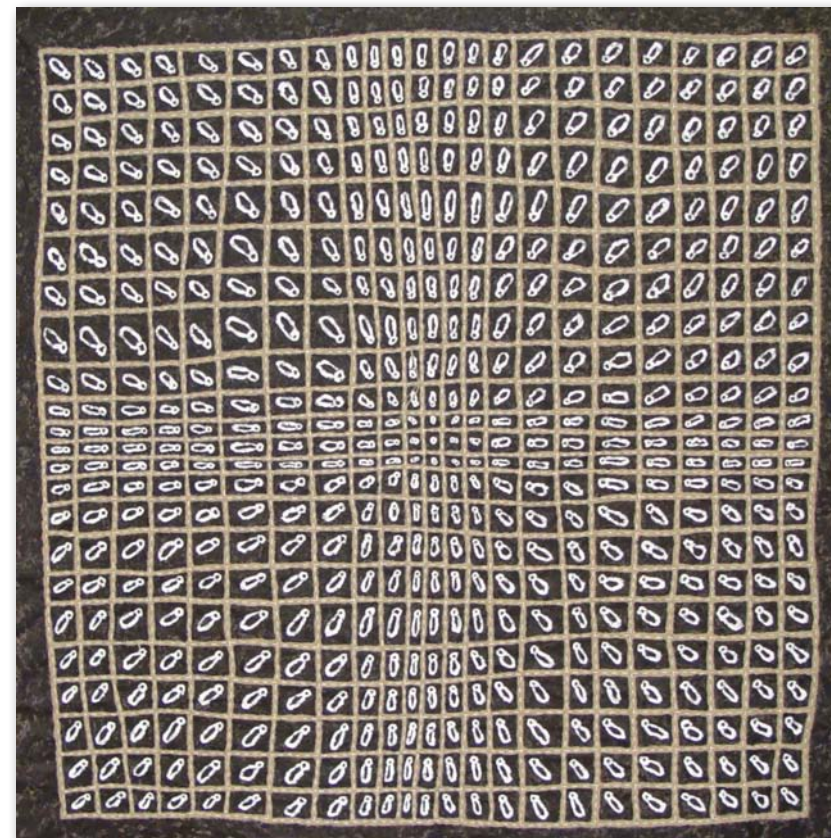


plate
Bivouac - Go to ground-Sublime [Antarctica]
 acrylic, thread, linen, 140cm x 140cm, 2003



detail
Travailogue – Brookes Hut
 acrylic, bandage, 5cm x 15cm ea. [x10], 2003

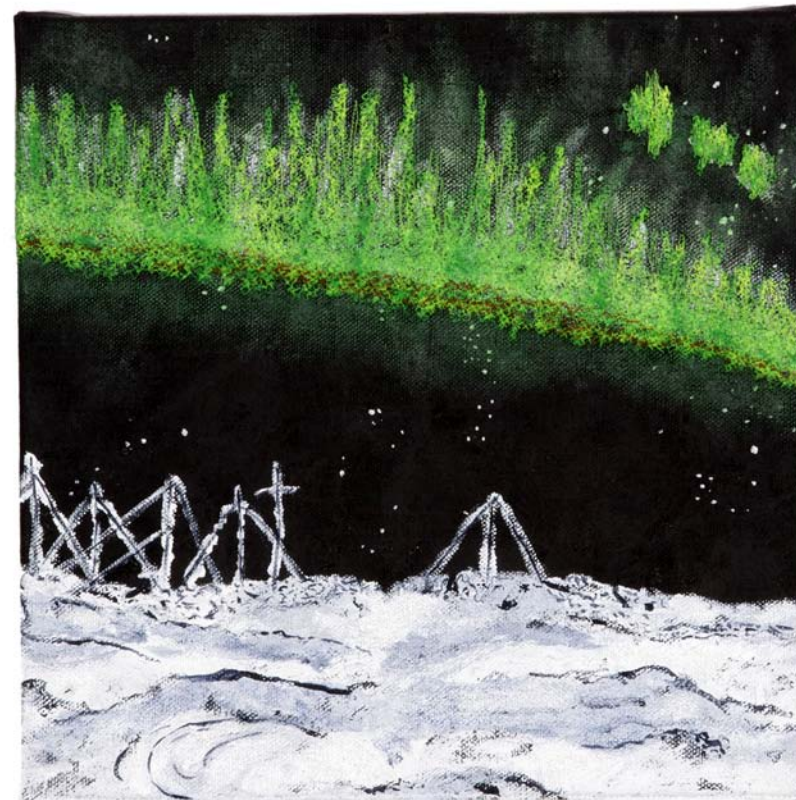


plate
Outlandish - Aurora Australis over Aerials
 acrylic, thread, linen, 23cm x 23cm, 2009

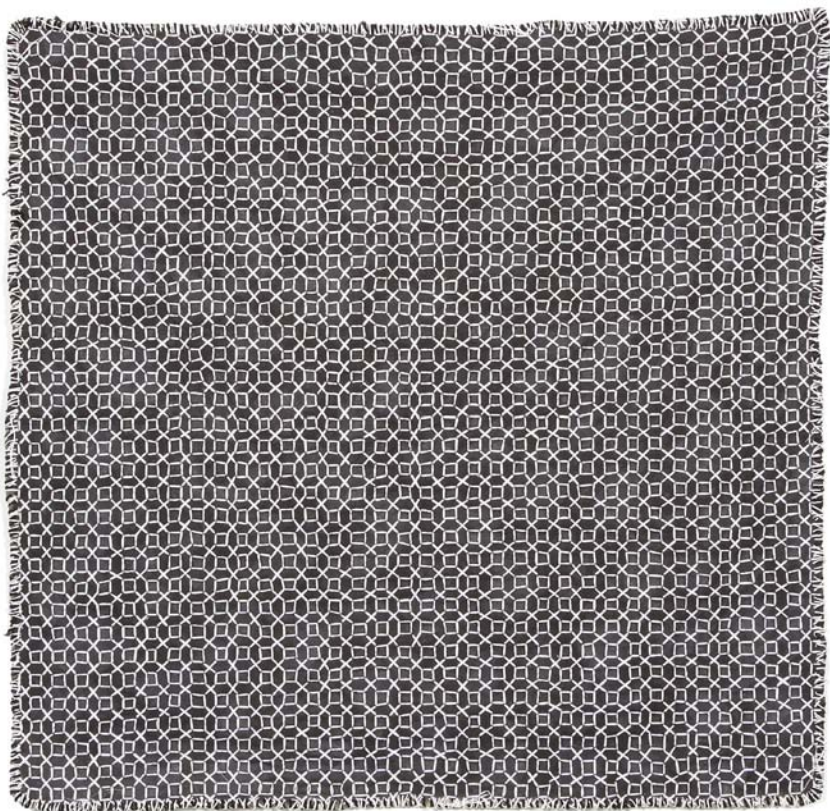


plate
Spaces and Places
 acrylic, cotton, wool, linen, 140cm x 140cm, 2009



plate
Domesticating Ice
 acrylic, wool, cotton, linen, 15cm x 15cm ea. [x20], 2006



plate [detail page 34|35]
Big beautiful dead place / Rafting sea ice
 acrylic, cotton, wool, linen, 210cm x 425cm, 2009



plate
Travaillogues - MacRobertson Land
 acrylic, bandage, 15cm x 25cm ea. [x10], 2009





plate
Self Containers [McMurdo Ross Island]
 acrylic, cotton, wool, linen, 140cm x 140cm, 2006, courtesy Rupert Myer
 Collection, Melbourne

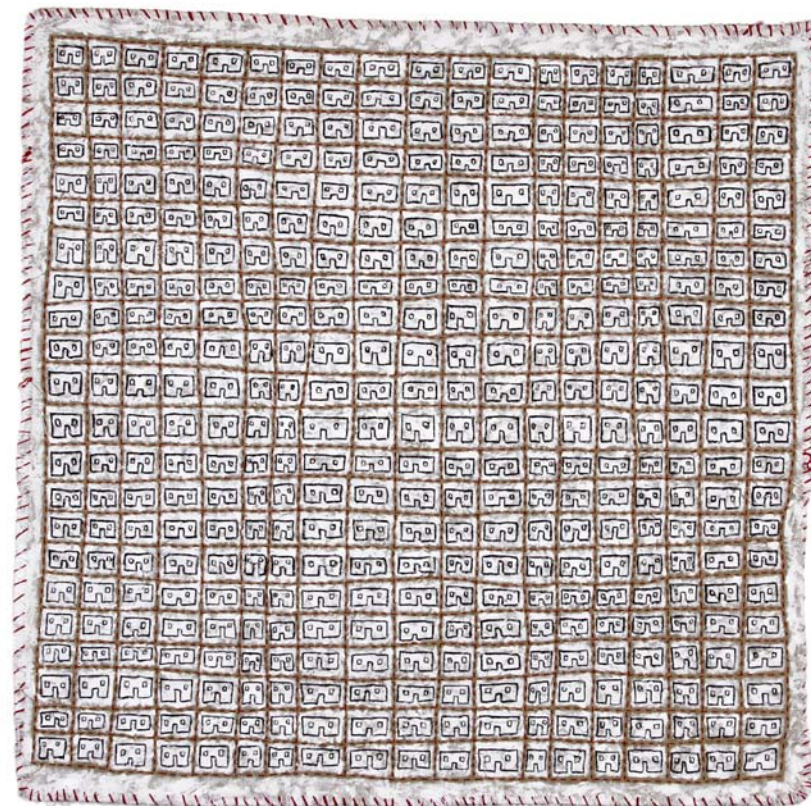


plate
Dongas/No one home
 acrylic, cotton, wool, linen, 140cm x 140cm, 2003

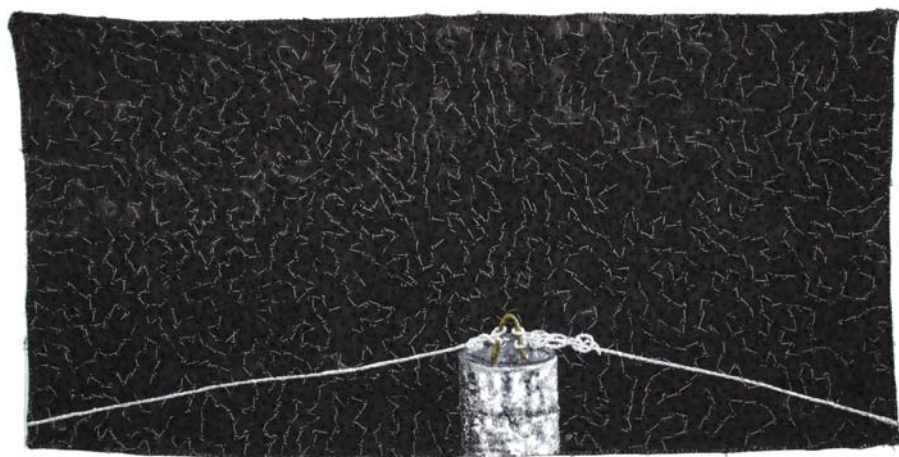


plate
Blizz Line [winter]
 acrylic, cotton, wool, linen, 210cm x 425cm, 2009



plate
Travailogue - Ice Algae
 acrylic, bandage, 7.5cm x 15.5cm ea. [x25], 2007



plate
Travailogue - Posts, poles and aerals,
 acrylic, bandage, 13cm x 17cm ea. [x10], 2007



plate
Travailogue - Cape Adare Hut
 acrylic, wool, bandage, 23cm x 23cm, 2006



plate
Husky Ghost Town [Bucht Tichaja, Franz Josef Land]
 acrylic, cotton, wool, linen, 210cm x 358cm, 2005



plate
White Flag (James Cook)
 acrylic, cotton, linen, 150cm x 150cm, 2003, courtesy of the Kerry Stokes Collection, Perth



plate
Antarctic Donga [Wilkesland panoramic]
 acrylic, hessian, 40x 200cm, 2000

biographies

Stephen Eastaugh was born in Melbourne, Australia and graduated from the Victorian College of the Arts in 1981. He is a visual artist with severe wanderlust as for the past three decades he has been on the road. Studios have been set up on a Russian Icebreaker at the North Pole and a hundred other locations across the planet. Eastaugh has been awarded on three occasions the Australian Antarctic Arts Fellowship from the Australian Antarctic Division (resupply to Casey Station in 2000, summer at Davis Station in 2002-03 and winter at Mawson Station in 2009.) He currently moves between Australia, Argentina and elsewhere. www.stepheneastaugh.com.au

Fernando do Campo was born in Mar del Plata, Argentina in 1987, and completed a BVA (Hon.) at the Australian National University, Canberra in 2008. Recent curatorial projects include *The Oyster's Locale*, Junction Arts Festival (JAF) 2010 and *I live with birds*, Raquel Ormella, *Iteration:Again*, CAST Gallery, Tasmania 2011. He has been the recipient of numerous grants and awards, including in 2012; an Arts Tasmania individual's curatorial grant involving a studio residency at the Cite Internationale des Arts, Paris and a Jump Mentorship (Australia Council) with Paul O'Neill. Fernando is currently Director of Sawtooth ARI and is a sessional lecturer at the SVPA, University of Tasmania.

A public gallery director and curator for 25 years, **David Hansen** is now Senior Researcher at Sotheby's Australia. He first developed an interest in the art of the Southern Ocean and the Antarctic while Senior Curator of Art at the Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery, where his exhibitions included Jörg Schmeisser: *Breaking the Ice* (2003), *Sea* (1997) and *A Wintry Mood* (1997).



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The curator would like to thank Stephen Eastaugh for his invitation to collaborate on this project and for his generosity throughout the process, and his family for creating a space from which place, home and location can be mutually questioned and loved.

detail

A good day tonight

acrylic, cotton, linen, 40cm x 40cm ea. [x30], 2009

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Melbourne, Australia
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20 October - 20 November 2012

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presentation partners



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COVER: detail
Travailogue - Ice Algae
acrylic, bandage, 7.5cm x 15.5cm ea. (x25), 2007

INNER COVER: detail
S.E.W.N. [Cardinal Points]
acrylic, cotton, wool, linen, 210cm x 350cm, 2006

